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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 AMMAN 001719

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [KISL](#) [KMPI](#) [JO](#)

SUBJECT: INTERIOR MINISTER GRILLED IN PARLIAMENT WHILE
OPPOSITION PARTIES CALL FOR NEW GOVERNMENT

REF: A. AMMAN 1353

[B](#). AMMAN 1309

[C](#). AMMAN 1234

[D](#). AMMAN 981

[E](#). AMMAN 709

Classified By: CDA David Hale for Reasons 1.4 (b), (d)

SUMMARY

[1](#). (C) Interior Minister Habashneh fended off heated questioning in Parliament regarding the GOJ's crackdown on political activity by the country's professional associations. Deputies from the Islamic Action Front (IAF) led the attack, while other MPs criticized the government for failing to promote the King's reform agenda. Habashneh's backers countered by calling for a vote of no confidence in the minister, confident that he would easily come out on top.

Separately, opposition parties submitted a petition asking King Abdullah to sack the current cabinet for its alleged back-pedaling on political development and to broaden public participation in recently formed royal commissions on decentralization and the creation of a national agenda. End Summary.

INTERIOR MINISTER FEELS THE HEAT

[2](#). (U) During a contentious parliamentary session February 23 that press reports described as "rife with confusion," several disgruntled MPs peppered Minister of Interior Samir Habashneh with questions on the GOJ's crackdown on political activity organized by Jordan's professional associations (refs a, e). Habashneh had recently added fuel to the fire by notifying IAF MPs Nidal Abbadi (East Banker, Amman) and Abdul Khawaldeh (East Banker, Mafrag) that they had violated the Public Assembly Law by giving "political speeches" following Friday prayers on February 18 without obtaining prior government permission. IAF MP Ali Abu Sukkar (West Banker, Zarqa), who had been physically barred from entering the Professional Associations Complex for a banned rally, led the attack along with his Islamist colleagues. In addition to accusing Habashneh of "insulting" Parliament by submitting "evasive and unsatisfactory" answers to written questions, Sukkar alleged that the minister had violated the Jordanian constitution by preventing MPs from exercising their right to engage in professional and political activities.

[3](#). (U) Habashneh in reply insisted that his ministry had acted properly and that he respected the role of MPs, saying that "the dignity of the (Lower) House is part of the state's dignity, which is preserved by implementing the law." Pro-government MPs quickly came to Habashneh's defense, stating that the ministry's actions were consistent with the Public Assembly Law and had "no political implications." They continued that the professional associations were not legally authorized to sponsor political activity and called for reconsidering laws requiring mandatory membership in the associations.

[4](#). (C) At the end of the February 23 session, pro-government MP Jamal Dmour (East Banker, Kerak) made a surprise move by submitting a petition signed by 14 MPs demanding a vote of no confidence in Habashneh as allowed by parliamentary bylaws. Dmour later told poloff that the petition was not meant to harm Habashneh, but that he believed a confidence vote would result in a clear majority of MPs voicing their support for the embattled Interior Minister, thereby strengthening his position. Dmour noted that Sukkar realized this all too well and, consequently, opposed the petition. (NOTE: Statements against Habashneh and calls for a confidence vote were not voiced during Parliament's session on February 27, suggesting the two sides had agreed at least temporarily to move on to other matters. END NOTE.)

FORMER MINISTERS SLAM THE GOVERNMENT

[5](#). (U) MP attacks against the government have not been confined to the floor of Parliament. In a recent interview with Arabic daily Al-Dustour, former minister and ex-Speaker

of the Lower House Saed Hayel Srou (East Banker, Northern Badia) harshly criticized the current cabinet for "having failed to interpret the King's vision for reform into reality." Srou claimed that he and other MPs did not understand the government's agenda because "it claims one things and does the opposite." He further accused the cabinet of dismissing the opinions of those who disagreed with it. Former Prime Minister Abdur Raouf Rawabdeh, speaking to Arabic weekly Al-Shahed with virulence rarely used in public by a former head of government, continued his campaign against the GOJ (ref c), accusing the government of spending "huge sums of money" from undisclosed sources and failing to resolve a single serious case of corruption.

CALLING FOR A CHANGE

16. (U) Local press reported on front pages February 23 that the Coordinating Committee of Opposition Parties sent a petition to King Abdullah appealing to him to form a new government that "respects the people's rights, the constitution and public freedoms." (NOTE: The Committee includes leaders from 15 parties ranging from socialists to conservative Islamists. All of the parties are relatively small and uninfluential, with the exception of the IAF which tends to dominate the Committee. END NOTE.) The petition charged that the current cabinet was incapable of "fulfilling the Jordanian people's aspirations for ... democracy and comprehensive development," and stated that the country had witnessed "a clear retreat by the government from the slogan of political development less than a year after it was formed."

17. (U) The Committee further suggested "expanding public participation" in the recently appointed royal commissions charged with studying decentralization and the creation of a national agenda (refs b, d). It requested that "all the political, economic and social figures and forces (be able) to engage in these committees and contribute to the comprehensive development process." The petition additionally called for "a democratic election law that adopts the principle of proportional representation," an independent judiciary, a free press, and the cessation of "restrictive government measures" against civil society institutions.

COMMENT

18. (C) Habashneh's warnings against "political speeches" at religious gatherings, and the governor of Amman's recent referral of IAF MP Abu Fares to the attorney general for "staging an unauthorized rally following Friday prayers" (septel), indicates that the GOJ may be broadening its clamp down on unwanted political activity. The call by opposition parties for greater public involvement in the two royal committees reflects the doubts of many that these bodies will stray from the government line. Deputy PM Marwan Muasher told Charge that the national agenda commission (ref b) would include sub-committees comprised of experts and civil society leaders for each of 11 different substantive themes. The decentralization commission (ref d), by contrast, would be limited to no "outside contact" as it tackles its work.

HALE